

# The God-Shaped Hole in the Human Soul

Glenn F. Chesnut

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The idea of a “God-shaped hole” in the human heart, a terrifying bottomless abyss opening up inside us which we would do anything to fill, is a famous modern metaphor for the yearning in the human soul which drives us on our spiritual quest. This is a modern paraphrase of something the famous philosopher and mathematician Pascal (1623-1662) wrote in his *Pensees* (10.148):<sup>1</sup>

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.

When Pascal wrote this, he was probably thinking, in part, of a famous passage at the beginning of Augustine’s *Confessions* (1.1.1), where the great African saint said to God, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are rest-less till they find their rest in you.” And Augustine went on to say that he wanted to ask God to come and dwell in him, but that he was not sure what it was that he

was actually asking for when he prayed to God in that fashion (1.2.2):<sup>2</sup>

What place is there in me to which my God can come, what place that can receive the God who made heaven and earth? Does this mean, O Lord my God, that there is in me something fit to contain you? ... Or, since nothing that exists could exist without you, does this mean that whatever exists does, in this sense, contain you? If this is so, since I too exist, why do I ask you to come into me? For I should not be there at all unless, in this way, you were already present within me.

Augustine raises an interesting question. Since God is everywhere at all times and all places, what could it mean to ask him to come into my heart and still my tormenting, restless discontent, since in some way God must already be there? I could not exist at all unless God's power was already there holding me in existence.

For when we speak of God as the Creator (the ground of being), we do not mean to refer only to that event at the beginning of time when God first brought this universe into existence. Modern physicists call that event "the Big Bang," when space and time, and all the energy and matter in the universe came into existence all at once, out of that mysterious reality which was there before, but which our mathematical equations cannot describe.<sup>3</sup> But God, this mysterious reality which is the eternal ground of all existence, was there for infinite times before the Big Bang, and continues to be there after the Big Bang, as that upon which the existence of everything else depends, such that if God were not there underneath at all times, the universe and everything in it would instantly blink out of existence on the spot.

I am held in existence by God, in a universe where God's power and glory are everywhere, both inside me and outside me, so that God is always already here.

And yet Augustine knows that the prayer which he is praying is the right one. He knows that what he longs for more than anything else is (1.5.5) “the gift of your coming into my heart and filling it to the brim, so that I may forget all the wrong that I have done and embrace you alone, my only source of good.” So he prays (1.5.6):

The house of my soul is too small for you to come in to me; let it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins, but I ask you to remake it. It contains much that you will not be pleased to see; this I confess to you and do not hide it.

I do not quarrel with you about your judgments, for you are Truth Itself; and I have not wished to be dishonest with myself, or it would be my wrongdoing lying to itself.

And in that last sentence, we see the partial answer to his question, in a theme which recurs over and over in the *Confessions*. We encounter God above all as Truth Itself, as that moment of insight in which God’s grace opens our eyes to some important truth about ourselves and God and the world, which enables our souls to be healed and our lives remade in finer and better form.<sup>4</sup>

So what I am actually praying for, is for God in his grace to open my eyes so that I can become aware of his presence. Developing a real God-consciousness in my heart and mind is the way that I will find rest and peace. In fact God was already here with me and always was with me — but I was not consciously aware of it. The way my restless heart finds rest and peace from its troubles and torments is to become aware of the great central Truth which is the most important truth of all: God’s light and grace and eternal holy presence is here with me. He is right here within my heart, where my knowledge of his presence will give me all the strength I need to deal with anything. And he is also everywhere outside me, where I can see his eternal glory shining all around me,

which means that I can let go and let him take care of me and everything else that is driving me to desperation.

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Pascal made an interesting comment about this longing for God in the passage which we quoted above: “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?” This seems an odd sort of thing to say, for most modern people. What is going on here? We are probably seeing an echo of an important spiritual tradition which went back even earlier than Augustine. It was presented in one of its classic formulations in the form of a “Platonic myth” created by the great third-century Christian theologian Origen.<sup>5</sup> This author was an Egyptian; his name means Horus Born, that is, child of the hawk-headed Egyptian god Horus. A Platonic myth means a symbolic and metaphorical tale like the ones which Plato loved to tell in order to make important points, like the Myth of Er and the Parable of the Cave in his *Republic*. These were stories which you certainly could not take literally. But if you thought carefully about what these tales was saying, you could get a grasp of something of utmost importance about the nature of life and the world.<sup>6</sup>

In Origen’s myth, at the beginning of all things, long before the creation of this present physical universe, God created a number of spirits. They spent their lives in the heavenly realm, with their eyes turned continually toward the vision of the glory of the sacred divine presence, so that they dwelt continually in the sunlight of the spirit.

But then some of these spirits began to rebel and turn away from the Vision of God,<sup>7</sup> and finally there was war in heaven. When the battle was over, those spirits who had sinned the most were turned by God into demons and cast down into hell, where the fallen angel Lucifer ruled over them. Those spirits who had

sided with God for the most part, although not perfectly, were allowed to become angels, and were allowed to continue to dwell in the heavenly realms.

Origen said that for those spirits who had sinned too much to become angels, but had not sinned enough to become demons, God created the present physical universe as a kind of reform school, and sent their spirits down to the planet Earth to live, where hopefully they would learn how to reform their ways. That is what we human beings are — immortal spirits imprisoned within material corruptible bodies — spirits who were not malicious and evil enough to have become genuine devils in their previous existence, but who fell far short of acting like angels.

We cannot usually truly remember much about our previous heavenly existence, during the period before we were born into our present material bodies here on earth. But like a dream which we can halfway recall the next day, as Pascal put it, “what else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in human beings a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?” Somehow we halfway remember that our lives should not be racked with such resentment and fear, and that somehow or other we have lost something which we used to have, or ought to have. And that which we have lost is of course the Vision of God which we once enjoyed before the great war in heaven arose and we turned away from that awareness of God’s presence, and shut our eyes to the sunlight of the spirit.

In Origen’s myth, there was only one totally unfallen spirit, only one of God’s beloved children, who did not turn away from him in the slightest, and kept his eyes locked continually upon the Vision of God. This spirit lived continually with a perfect God-consciousness, always retaining an awareness of the divine presence. Since Origen was a Christian, he said that this one unfallen spirit was the human soul of Jesus Christ. Christ was appointed by God to serve as the God-bearer, and sent down to

Earth, where he was clothed in a physical body just like the poor human beings living down there in prison, to show those human beings the way back to the Vision of God which would save them and allow them to return at death to that heavenly home from which they had been exiled.

Origen was one of the most influential teachers of early Christianity, as influential in Eastern Orthodox Christianity as Augustine was in western Roman Catholic and later Protestant Christianity, but he was not always the most orthodox of theologians! One can see a number of Egyptian-style gnostic elements intermixed in his thoughts.<sup>8</sup>

The gnostics believed in a doctrine of the transmigration of souls, an idea which they had borrowed from Greek philosophy, from the Platonists and Pythagoreans.<sup>9</sup> Origen likewise believed in a sort of transmigration of souls, where our spirits would go at death to the realm most appropriate to the amount of spiritual growth (or the reverse) which we had accomplished. We could end up in our next life down in hell with the demons, or up in heaven with the angels, or back here on earth again for another try at reforming us.

But since the power of God's love, Origen believed, was so great that nothing eventually could withstand its healing power, by the end of time, all of God's creatures would eventually be saved in what he called the consummation of all things (the *apokatastasis pantôn*, see Acts 3:21), when even Lucifer himself would once more be restored to his original role. For Lucifer means Light Bearer, and he had once been second only to Jesus Christ himself in the heavenly realm. At the end of time, even he, the chief of the demons, would once more wear a snowy robe, and be the loving bearer of enlightenment instead of the hate-filled Prince of Darkness.

In the modern world, Dostoyevski refers to this part of the story — the ultimate salvation of Satan at the consummation of all

things — in *The Brothers Karamazov*, for the Russian novelist took that part of the Origenist myth quite seriously. No one — not even the Prince of Darkness — will be condemned to hell forever, and at the end of time, God will be all in all, and the Kingdom of Peace and Love will once more be home to all of God's beloved children. No one will be left out, and God will wipe away every tear.

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So the modern metaphor of the God-shaped hole in the middle of the human soul had a long prehistory, which went back to some of the most formative thinkers of the ancient world. How can we “demythologize” or “deconstruct” this ancient tale, and put it in modern language?

Augustine helps point us in the right direction. Where is the preexistent world of the Platonic myths, the world where our souls lived before they were incarnated in our present mode of life? In the memory banks of our brains, Augustine said, particularly in those parts of the mind where the most deeply buried memories are stored, which we call the subconscious. That is what the mythical language was actually symbolizing, he believed, when it spoke of a lost transcendent world of mystery and awareness of the primordial truths.

We have to go back into the land of memory to find the truth. In the *Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*, Bill Wilson (the co-founder of the A.A. movement) tells the story of how he was destroying his life with drinking, when one day at the end of 1934, a friend from his youth named Ebby visited him in his kitchen. Ebby was now stone cold sober, and Bill was amazed. Bill at first tried to counter what Ebby was telling him about the spiritual awakening which had freed him from alcohol, by reciting all his own most skeptical and cynical antireligious arguments. But in spite of himself, Bill was plunged into a trip back into long

forgotten memories of encounters he had had with the spiritual dimension of reality, both as a child and as a young man, which he had regarded as unimportant and irrelevant at the time (Big Book pp. 10 and 12-13). And above all he remembered his awareness of the sacred and of the divine presence which he had felt when he entered Winchester Cathedral as a young military officer during the First World War. That turned out to be the key buried memory. To make sure that his readers realized how important it was, Bill Wilson introduced that motif on the very first page of the Big Book, at the very beginning of the story.

But that was linked to additional memories, where Bill also remembered “the sound of the preacher’s voice” as he sat as a child on a hillside at a great distance from the little New England Protestant church where he lived. This trip into the past was a journey back into feelings, not words and theories, because he could not make out the actual words themselves which the preacher was speaking, nor was he thinking about the preacher’s theological theories and the doctrines he was expounding. What the little boy was aware of however was that the man in the church was talking about things which he recognized to be sacred things.

Bill remember his grandfather too, a man for whom he had great honor and respect, who showed him that the awe and wonder that you felt when you gazed up into the starry heavens at night was equally much a feeling of the sacred, and an experience of the sacred, his grandfather reminded him, where the preacher in the church could not tell you what you were supposed to believe about it.

The ancient theologian Origen was a Christian, so his way of explaining things could only have one true God-bearer, and that one had to be sinless and perfect. From the very beginning, the early AA people discovered however that the Father of Light sends us many God-bearers, all of them vessels of clay, and many of them very far indeed from being perfect. God had used even poor



Ebby, who never could stay sober for very long, as the God-bearer whose job was to open Bill Wilson's eyes at the beginning. Bill's grandfather had been a God-bearer too, and even though Bill had not realized this as a child, the memory of his grandfather was finally allowed to speak (in his long dead grandfather's behalf) another vital part of the message God needed to communicate to Bill.

We all have memories somewhere of a few encounters at the very least with a sacred realm, where we got at least a tiny touch of awe and wonder, and also somehow a fleeting taste of peace and reassurance. This is where the Truth lies, the moment of insight which Augustine said could bring God into the little house of my soul as a conscious presence, repairing the broken plaster and leaky roof, and scrubbing the floors, and expanding and enlarging the dark and filthy little hovel in which I had been living, until it became a mighty mansion shining from every window with the light of the divine presence within.

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The God-shaped hole in the human heart is in fact an infinite and terrifying abyss, Pascal said, which I try to cover over with all sorts of false facades. But then a crack appears in the facade, and I see through it the well of eternal nothingness plunging down forever, and I hurl myself back in total horror. Only that which is infinite and completely transcendent, Pascal said, could fill such an abyss.

Can I pour alcohol or some other chemical through the crack in the facade and fill the primordial abyss of nonbeing and remove the unbearable terror? This does not work for very long. Sigmund Freud said in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that no mood-altering chemicals ultimately perform this job satisfactorily. For a while Freud thought that cocaine could safely do this, and had to

learn the hard way, through his own personal experience, that in the long run it worked no better than alcohol.

Can I fill the primordial abyss with the adrenaline surge of gambling or other thrill seeking, or the trance-like state of the sex addict searching for his or her next release? This does not work for very long either, and likewise leads us down a path of personal destruction. I cannot fill the void which looms below with compulsive caretaking and rescuing, or by fanatically following rigid religious rules. I cannot fill the hole with food, or compulsive spending.

I cannot cover over the abyss forever by intellectualizing everything and trying to think “logically” and “scientifically” at all times, and denying that the infinite void is even there at all, for this is also a flight into fantasy. Beware of people who talk too much about being “realists,” for they are the ones whose fantasies are the most naive of all! I have seen this kind of attempt to paper over the abyss be ripped to shreds too many times. The antireligious psychologist suddenly discovers that he has fatal liver cancer. The skeptical philosopher’s wife suddenly announces that she is filing for divorce and taking the children and the house (and everything else) with her. The cynical historian’s child is run over and killed in an automobile accident. The rationalistic physicist suddenly realizes that the government is using his discoveries to build bombs which are poised in missiles and aircraft and submarines all over the globe, and that one false move in a quarrel currently going on over a small island or a tiny peninsula is at the point of precipitating decisions which will kill all or most of the entire human race.

We cannot ultimately flee from the vision of this abyss of nothingness, or paper it over, or fill it up with food or alcohol or drugs, or keep ourselves perpetually so busy and preoccupied that we will never have to look down into it.

There is something however which can in fact fill the infinite void and turn it into a realm of light, and it is already there, and the knowledge of it is already in our memories — but it is buried away so deep, that we have forgotten what it is, so that “all that now remains” at the conscious level, Pascal said, “is the empty print and trace.” It is but the ghost of a memory which therefore gives us no peace, but only haunts us with the dim awareness that our lives somehow should not be sunk in this horrible anxiety and misery. Ironically, we come to fear this ghost memory of the light which would save us, just as much as we fear the abyss of darkness which opens up beneath us.

We can try to use the same tricks to chase away this ghost, which we tried to use to veil our view of the abyss which yawns below: alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, caretaking and rescuing, eating, spending, throwing ourselves into fanatical religion-oholism, or allowing ourselves to be possessed by the control neurosis of the intellectualizers and rationalizers who believe that if we can just come up with the right “scientific” theories we can keep the ghost out of our bedrooms at night.

But the ghost of the God of whose presence my subconscious is already aware still comes back to haunt me, just as the façade I try to erect over the abyss of nothingness keeps on developing cracks in it. I fall into denial and fleeing, and spend half of my time trying to pretend that the infinite hole in my soul is not there, and the other half of the time trying to pretend that the God whose light and comfort would fill that hole does not exist either.

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In the ancient world, human beings were often described as beings who had what we would call today the souls of angels and the bodies of monkeys. But the angel and the monkey have to learn how to respect one another and care for one another and love one another, if we are going to have a healthy spirituality. We will just

make ourselves miserable and accomplish nothing worthwhile if the monkey tries to pretend that the angel is only an illusion, or if the angel believes that it will become more “spiritual” by grossly mistreating the monkey.

For most of the past two thousand years, the western world has tended to fall more often into the latter misunderstanding of spirituality. In century after century, people were praised for doing insane things in the name of religion. Those terrible French “saints” from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like Madame Guyon for example, who contracted smallpox and then deliberately spread the infected areas to her face so that she could destroy her beauty with dreadful scars, along with the religious fanatics who wore haircloth undergarments and chains around their waists and slept on the stone floors of churches,<sup>10</sup> were praised as great religious heroes who attained the greatest heights of spirituality by punishing their poor bodies in every way they could imagine, but were in fact people obsessed with a neurotic and perverted self-hatred.

The angel and the monkey are both important, each in its own way, and both have their rights. Good parents do not praise their children for deliberately pulling out their hair or cutting themselves with knives — we regard children like that as deeply disturbed and send them to psychiatrists — so how could a good and loving God take delight in that kind of mental disorder?

Can alcoholism be arrested through continual punishment of the body? The Irishman Matt Talbot is sometimes held up as an example. He was an alcoholic who had been destroying himself through drink, and he had been doing it for years, not caring that he was killing himself. But then he had something like a conversion experience, and was able to stop his drinking by fasting every day, sleeping on a plank, allowing himself only four or five hours sleep a night, and engaging in other austerities. He went to mass every morning before going to work as a laborer in a lumber

yard, and spent half of every Sunday in church. When he dropped dead on a Dublin street in 1925, they found three chains embedded in his flesh: one wrapped around his waist, another around an arm, and the third around one leg. He died sober, but this looks very much like simply the substitution of one kind of self-hatred by another.

This is the dark side of ancient gnosticism, which was supposedly suppressed within the Christian church by the fourth century, but which simply went underground at that point, and has continued to crop out in Christian practice over and over again through all the succeeding centuries. Gnosticism tells us that if the spiritual world is good, and the material world is evil, then the path to salvation necessarily entails denying and punishing our bodies and fleeing from any kind of pleasure of any sort, while simultaneously deliberately inflicting pain on ourselves. We dare not sleep in a bed that does not make our bones ache, we become afraid to eat even simple food unless its taste is unpleasant, and we work continually to take every single bit of joy and delight out of our lives, all in the name of “spirituality.” For our bodies and our pleasures are all part of the material world, which gnosticism has defined as the ultimate evil.

In a good spirituality, the angel cannot be allowed to do that to the monkey, because an angel who does that sort of thing to any living creature — taking a sick pleasure out of keeping it in continual pain — is no longer an angel but a demon.

In a healthy spirituality, some sort of balance must be maintained between our spiritual needs and our physical needs. That is the principle which structures both the Rule of St. Benedict and the chapter on the Fourth Step in Bill Wilson’s *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*.

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Corresponding to those two levels of human cares and concerns, it was believed in the ancient world that there were two different dimensions of being, the sacred and the profane.<sup>11</sup> Up above lies the realm of the transcendent, and down below lies the realm of physical nature. By “profane” we do not mean that which is obscene or sacrilegious, but that which is *pro fanum*. The *fanum* in ancient Latin meant the place consecrated to a god, including both the temple and the land around it. When you stand inside the boundaries of the *fanum*, you are standing on holy ground. That which is *pro fanum* on the other hand, is that which is situated in the ordinary world lying outside the fence or wall which guards the consecrated grounds.

Some beings are constructed in such a way that they are able to dwell continually in the transcendent world. Jews, Christians, and Muslims call these beings angels. Ancient pagan Greeks and Romans called them gods. Other beings are constructed in such a way that they can live only within the realm of the physical and material world: earthworms, trout, frogs, trees, and so on. They do not feel this as a hardship, because they cannot even imagine any higher kind of existence.

Human beings are constructed however in a way where they live partly in one of these realms and partly in the other. This is an extremely difficult kind of existence. The ancient Christian texts say that those human beings who truly work out how to live in both of those worlds satisfactorily will find, when they go to the eternal realm, that the angels will be falling down before them and singing songs of praise, and that these highest human souls will be regarded in heaven as superior in rank even to the greatest of the angels. That is how difficult the human task is.

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St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>12</sup> in the thirteenth century attempted to deal with the twofold nature of human existence by following the

principle that “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.” So when he talked about human psychology, he accepted the fact that there was a natural realm where one could discuss psychological problems (and how to heal them) without bringing in any sort of spiritual issues. The four natural virtues gave us a description of a psychologically healthy person in totally secular terms.

Prudence referred to learning how to think before we spoke or acted, instead of just lashing out with our first impulse. It dealt with learning greater ego control, and learning to become aware that our actions always had consequences.

Temperance referred to learning how to tolerate the ordinary discomforts of life, and learning about delayed gratification. Trying to operate continually on the childish principle of “I want what I want and I want it now” was a recipe for disaster. Both in the family and on the job, I had to learn that there were some tasks I had to do which were hard work and sometimes unpleasant, and I had to learn how to compromise on some of my desires.

Fortitude referred to learning how to stand up for myself, for I need to learn how to set proper boundaries and act assertively to protect myself against people who are attempting to transgress those boundaries. Fortitude was linked to building up both my self-esteem and my basic survival instinct. In cases of “fight or flight,” my best hope of survival sometimes lay in summoning the courage to fight.

Justice referred to learning certain fundamental principles of fair play in my dealings with other human beings. Marriage counselors spend a lot of their time trying to teach husbands and wives to play fair with one another, and to respect the fact that my spouse also has rights.

In addition to these four secular virtues, Aquinas said, there were also three spiritual virtues: faith, hope, and love. Working on the principle that “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it,” he made it clear that even the most deeply spiritual people still had to

practice prudence, temperance, courage, and justice. Even if their hearts were overflowing with the gifts of grace, they still had to think before acting, and tolerate necessary discomforts and delayed gratification, and stand up for themselves and set boundaries, and play fair. And on the other side, grace certainly does not allow people to lie, cheat, steal, be cowardly, complain about everything that does not go their way, scream at other people, and wallow in neurotic fantasy.

Grace — which gave us faith, hope, and love — did not destroy our natural instincts and virtues, but added “something extra” to our lives, that made them even better and more satisfying.

Faith meant learning to trust the fundamental goodness of reality, which has its own kind of innate goodness, because coming to know the truth about my life and the universe (no matter how frightening it seems at first) will ultimately be healing for me. Faith meant learning the kind of existential courage which allows me to look down into the infinite abyss which Pascal talked about, without fleeing into denial and escapism. It meant developing the bravery to venture into the unknown. Psychotherapy will not work without that kind of faith.

Hope meant a willingness to look beyond the torn and tattered shape of my life at present, and see the possibility of healing and the restoration of wholeness. It meant learning that there are situations which look hopeless, which can nevertheless be changed in ways that will bring new life. Psychotherapy will not work until despair can be replaced with that kind of hope.

Love meant developing something worthwhile to desire and want and care about. The desire to flee from pain may drive me into psychotherapy, but I will not start getting well until I recover some of my ability to *lieben und arbeiten* (to use Freud’s words), the ability “to love and work.” That means the capacity to form intimate and caring human relations, and it also means that I must develop things I can do where I can feel that my life is useful, or at



least satisfying and worthwhile. That is the ultimate goal of good psychotherapy.

Now the very best secular psychotherapists always “cheat” as it were, because although they claim that they are only practicing a secular variety of psychotherapy, they understand the importance of the spiritual values of faith, hope, and love, and so they in fact try to teach their patients how to live life in that higher kind of way. But these are actually not secular values, and they cannot be “proved” to exist by scientific reasoning, so in fact this is no longer a truly secular psychotherapy any longer. So why do the very best therapists do it anyway? Because they are good men and women, who know that these spiritual values “perfect” our secular lives by bringing them to their highest possibilities.

The very best secular psychotherapy smuggles the spiritual element in surreptitiously, and thereby gives patients a little bit more than they would have had otherwise. What the founders of the twelve step movement discovered was that when we come out totally in the open about this spiritual dimension, even more psychological healing takes place, and it takes place far more quickly and easily.

It is an inescapable fact that, for human beings to feel that their lives are truly satisfying and worthwhile, they are going to have to develop faith, hope, and love in the sense described above. Admitting openly that this is what we are doing is the easiest and best way to do this, for there are techniques of prayer and meditation which do more to help growth in this area of human life than anything else we can do. And there really is no way to tell people to take up prayer and meditation without admitting that we are teaching them about spirituality!

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Let me try a metaphor of my own to perhaps illustrate a little more clearly, the twofold nature of human life, a metaphor which

describes in a slightly different way both the human problem and its solution. Let us imagine a bird with a broken wing. There are two kinds of therapy we could practice on this wounded bird. We could try to teach the bird how to live as successfully as possible on the ground. Or we could heal the bird's wing and teach it to fly again.

One kind of secular psychology attempts to treat the bird with the broken wing by teaching it strategies for foraging around on the ground for fallen seeds, and coping as best it can with an earthbound life. Even in Alcoholics Anonymous, regrettably enough, one can find members who have gone years without a drink, but who are still crippled spiritually. When you see someone with ten or twenty or more years in the program, who is still going around angry all the time, and starting continual fights and arguments, and bullying people — or someone who collapses into depression and despair and feelings of total worthlessness on a frequent basis — we are dealing with someone who has refused to carry out the full spiritual work of the program.

We can even imagine groups of birds with broken wings, gathering together and gazing up into the sky at the birds who are flying around freely and joyfully, and criticizing them as dreamers and fools and people who refuse to think scientifically and take responsibility, and as people who are just “fleeing from reality.” There is however always a bitterness of some sort in the wounded birds who form these little groups of naysayers, because as Pascal said, “there was once in them a true happiness,” even if “all that now remains is the empty print and trace” of a buried memory of the time, back in the forgotten past, when they too knew how to fly.

A good twelve step program takes wounded birds and uses a totally different kind of therapy on them. It heals their broken wings and teaches them to fly again. Once these little birds learn

how to soar through the heavens again, it is only rarely that any are driven back to alcohol or drugs.

Chemical substances like alcohol and drugs can make us feel as though we were flying. But real flying is always better than pretend flying. Taking a drug which makes me feel as though I were coping with the problems of my life effectively, does no great amount of good in the long run unless I am given help in learning how to actually cope with the problems of my life effectively. Antidepressants and antipsychotics and other medications of this sort can be life savers with people who are in serious trouble psychologically, but if at all possible, this sort of medication should be combined with the kind of talk therapy which teaches us better ways of dealing with life.

I am well aware that with some mental patients, all we can do is medicate them, just as with some medical patients, all we can do is give them pain killers until they finally die. But I am talking here about what our goal should be in situations where we can do more than simply dope people up.

If we can teach the wounded bird to fly again, even just a little bit, this is the most precious gift we can give that injured creature. If we can take people in the twelve step program and teach them even just a little bit about real spirituality, it will enormously help all their other psychological symptoms.

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In A.A. meetings in northern Indiana in the old days, the members sometimes referred to non-members as the “earth people.” There was a bit of self-deprecating humor in that little phrase. Alcoholics, even after years in recovery, react so differently to the world around them, that they sometimes have trouble even beginning to comprehend the cares and worries and logic of the non-alcoholics among whom they live. They often feel like aliens from outer space, dumped down on a planet called

Earth, where the local inhabitants have customs and thought processes which are so totally incomprehensible, that they often feel lost and totally out of touch with what is going on. So they laugh, because there is nothing they can do about this, and because they realize that even people who feel like space aliens can learn to have a good time and enjoy their lives.

But there was a deeper level of meaning to that little phrase, which was not humorous at all. Some of these other people, the “earth people” who acted in such strange ways, were what the ancient world called the chthonic race, those who were locked to the earth and could never rise above it. The spiritual masters of the twelve step program were, in contrast, the “people of heaven,” those who could live and move freely in the transcendent realm.

There are those who brag that they “have no God-shaped hole in the middle of their souls,” thank you very much, and regard any talk of spiritual awareness as fantasy and self-delusion. This raises the interesting question of whether these unfortunates are “earth people” in the ultimate and irredeemable sense. Some of the ancient gnostics of the second and third century said that there were such pitiful souls, which were doomed to remain forever enchained in the cycle of birth and rebirth. John Calvin likewise in the sixteenth century believed that there were those who were predestined to live locked out of the kingdom of light for all eternity. Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century also made a clear distinction between those human beings who had the existential courage to gaze into the abyss of nonbeing (who could therefore learn to take responsibility for their own lives and live authentically), and those who had no more higher spiritual awareness than sheep or cattle.

Bill Wilson in the twentieth century similarly declared that there were those who could not follow the twelve step path to higher spiritual awakening, and he stated it in predestinarian language: they could never do it, and there was nothing anyone could do to

help them, because “they seem to have been born that way.” But he gave an interesting twist to this old idea, because he did not say that it was because their minds were too dense or because they were in fact lacking in the ability to be aware of spiritual realities or because God refused to send them grace, but because they were “constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves.”<sup>13</sup> This is a good Augustinian approach, for we remember how Augustine referred to God as “Truth Itself” in that passage in the *Confessions* which we quoted above, and then went on to say, “I have not wished to be dishonest with myself, or it would be my wrongdoing lying to itself.” In other words, both Augustine and Bill W. were talking about what Jean Paul Sartre called *mauvaise foi*, the kind of self-deception in which my lies lie even to themselves.

There are some “earth people,” Bill W. said, who would never find spiritual enlightenment because their lives were a tissue of alibis and excuses and refusal to face the reality of their own existences, and their thought processes were an endless series of tricks and rationalizations to “explain away” every instance in which a tiny ray of the sunlight of the spirit attempted to shine into the darkness of their hearts.

The spiritual masters of the twelve steps were, in contrast to these doomed souls, the “people of heaven.” They could fly on the winged chariot of the soul described in the great myth in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where learning to control the chariot means learning the correct balance between the three parts of the soul which are involved: intellectual thought (the rational ego), the natural instinct of anger and aggression, and the natural instinct which makes us desire physical pleasure and entertainment and relaxation. A very difficult vessel to learn how to maneuver and fly successfully, because it can only move smoothly and swiftly when its three parts have a just and right relationship between themselves (called *dikaio sunê* in Plato’s Greek).<sup>14</sup> But once having mastered the

winged chariot of the soul, these spiritual masters could ascend at will into the eternal realm of the sunlight of the spirit.

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Pascal and Augustine and Bill Wilson, and those other great spiritual masters of the past, were not just posing curious intellectual puzzles for us to toy over and talk about. They were trying to confront us with a decision which we have to make. There are two different directions we can go, two different kinds of people we can become, two different kinds of destiny at which we can arrive.

So which do we wish to be? Earth people, or the masters of the winged chariot? Do we wish to continue pretending that the yearnings of our souls are imagination and nonsense? Or do we want to learn how to soar up into the eternal sunlight once again?

Let us remember what Pascal observed: if this desire to feel the sunlight of the spirit penetrating down into our hearts is fantasy and illusion and could never be carried out in reality, then why is it that there is a place down at the bottom of our souls where we remember actually having experienced it before?

## NOTES

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1993), 45.

2. In this and the following quotations, I am basing my translation partly upon that of my great teacher, Albert C. Outler, in *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, Library of Christian Classics VII (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), and partly upon the excellent and very readable translation by R. S. Pine-Coffin, in *Augustine, Confessions* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961). See also Glenn F. Chesnut, "The Pattern of the Past: Augustine's Debate with Eusebius and Sallust," in John Deschner, Leroy T. Howe, and Klaus Penzel (eds.), *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 69-95.

3. For this mysterious reality out of which the Big Bang exploded, is outside of space and time, and of necessity contains nothing that follows the physical laws of mass and energy as we know them, so that we cannot find figures to use for equations where  $t$  = time, and where space is measured in  $x$ ,  $y$ ,  $z$  coordinates, and where  $m$  = mass and  $E$  = energy. And even if we could modify our equations in some way, this ground of being contains that which is infinite. Since it is literally meaningless to speak of multiplying or dividing any number by infinity, or adding infinity to any finite and comprehensible number, our laws of physics and our mathematical equations which we attempted to devise in order to describe this ground of being, would turn into gibberish, no matter how we twisted and turned them.

4. When Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century speaks of God as Being Itself, this is simply an adaptation of Augustine's concept of God as Truth Itself, for when I learn an important new truth, it causes some new dimension of Being to appear. See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, one of the two best books written in the twentieth century on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, who uses the concept of the moment of insight into some important new truth as the key to explaining the entire Thomistic system; and also the works of Paul Tillich, who adapts the Thomistic concept of God as Being Itself to fit it into a twentieth-century

existentialist philosophical framework, in which God becomes the power who brings being out of nonbeing, when our lives seemed crushed into nothingness and we are ready to give up in despair.

5. Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1936). For a general study of his role in the development of Christian theology, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols. (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950-60) and Berthold Altaner, *Patrology*. one vol., trans. H. C. Graef (New York: Herder and Herder, 1960).

6. In the language of ancient Greek patristic theology, we first use the kataphatic method to explore the inner connections of the myth or metaphor, so that we can understand the way its various parts fit together. Then we use the apophatic method to look beyond the myth or metaphor to where it is pointing, for it functions, not as a literal description, but as a signpost pointing beyond itself to the transcendent reality which we need to encounter. It is like following signposts to the Grand Canyon. Each one leads us one step further, until finally we arrive at the signpost which has an arrow on it saying "look here, here is the beauty and grandeur of the canyon right before your eyes." Literalists come back home with dozens of photographs of all the signposts and then argue for years about the logical connections between the signposts, but if you ask them, "what did you think of that extraordinary view which lay before your eyes?" you discover that they never bothered to look at the canyon itself.

7. Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. A. Moorhouse (London: Faith Press, 1963) and *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. I. H. Erickson and T. E. Bird (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974). Also John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974).

8. Origen's system was an attempt to find an orthodox Christian replacement for the gnostic myth, which viewed this universe in which we live as the creation of an evil or fallen creator god, who had created it to hold our spirits prisoner, and keep them from returning to the supreme God and his realm of light and love. The gnostics pointed to all the pain and suffering in the world (loathsome diseases and children born with birth defects and all the other bad things that happened to human beings) to argue that it could not be the work of a good and loving God. In



Alexandria in Egypt, where Origen spent his early years, many of the gnostics said that it was the fallen Sophia and her henchman, the Demiurge (who was the God of the Old Testament) who had created the world in which we human beings were now imprisoned. On gnosticism, see for example Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) and David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), which contains a good selection of actual gnostic texts, including the Gospel of Thomas, the Acts of Thomas (and the Hymn of the Pearl), along with the Gospel of Philip.

9. The idea of the transmigration of souls had come into Greece after the Homeric period via the Orphic movement, a religious movement that had come down out of central Asia, and probably had its origins in the shamanism of the steppes of central Asia, where belief in a radical body-soul dualism arose out of some of the experiences which these shamans had when they fell into trances. For a general study of ancient Greek ideas on the immortality of the soul, see Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1925).

10. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Gifford Lectures delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902 (New York: Random House, 1994), gives a number of examples, both Protestant and Catholic, in the latter part of the chapter on "Saintliness" (Lectures 11-13).

11. See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), and lying behind his ideas, the fundamental discoveries made by Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950); for the German text I use Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, 11th ed. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1923).

12. Thomas Aquinas, *Nature and Grace: Selections from the Summa Theologica*, trans. A. M. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954).

13. In the Big Book: *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001) 58.

14. In modern English translations of Plato, *dikaiousunê* is usually translated as “justice,” although I once had a conversation with Professor Robert Vacca, the world expert on Plato’s Greek, and we discovered that he and I had independently come to the conclusion that “sanity” or “mental balance” would usually be a better translation. In modern English translations of the New Testament, this same word is usually translated as “righteousness,” which raises some thought-provoking questions about whether people who are too religious (in the wrong kinds of ways) have as good an understanding as they think they do of what the New Testament authors were actually teaching. This is particularly so because we need to remember that all the good philosophers of the ancient world (both Christian and Jewish) who knew the Bible thoroughly, were convinced that Plato and the Bible were both teaching exactly the same thing on most of the essential spiritual issues. This would include thinkers as diverse as Philo Judaeus, Justin Martyr, Eusebius of Caesarea, and even that cranky old curmudgeon Tertullian (in spite of his occasional antiphilosophical declamations to the tune of “what has Jerusalem to do with Athens!”) Somewhat amusingly, many of the ancient Christian authors (who could not believe that anyone except themselves had ever received true divine inspiration) attempted to explain the similarities between Plato and the Bible by claiming that Plato had somehow gotten hold of a Greek translation of the Old Testament, and had shamelessly plagiarized much of his teaching from that source.